

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Feb 2nd 2014

The Christmas decorations have long since been put away and the commercial world has already peaked for Valentine's day. Nevertheless, you may be surprised to know that, until very recently, today's feast, the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple, was the Church's formal closing of the Christmas season. Moreover, the story in today's gospel – Mary and Joseph bringing their baby to the temple in accordance with the law – is itself the climax and conclusion of St. Luke's entire Christmas story, as Simeon proclaims the baby Jesus “a light of revelation to the gentiles and the glory” of His people, Israel. We might today read that story whole (running from Luke 1:5 through 2:39) and allow ourselves both to marvel at its unity and innerconnectedness and to be challenged by what those verses call us to be and to do.

The story starts with an elderly couple (Zachary and Elizabeth) in the Jerusalem temple dealing with the fruit of a miraculous pregnancy, and concludes with another elderly pair, (Simeon and Anna) also in the temple at Jerusalem, at the presentation to God of the fruit of yet another miraculous pregnancy. These opening and closing verses serve as bookends for the Nativity story, a story that is both familiar and of such depth that it never palls. Its verses have given us the songs that have been a part of the Church's daily liturgy from ancient times.

First, there is Mary's Magnificat on her visit to Elizabeth, now a part of daily Evening Prayer in the Divine Office. And there is Zachary's hymn of praise (the Benedictus) on the occasion of the circumcision of John the Baptist, now a part of Morning Prayer. Then there is the song of the angels in Bethlehem, now the Gloria at Mass on Sundays and feast days. And finally there is Simeon's hymn of good-bye to God, read in today's gospel, and forever a part of Night Prayer in the Divine Office. Notable as they are, these are just the most obvious uses of the richness of these two first chapters in Luke's gospel, which are themselves filled with Old Testament references and allusions.

After noting and admiring all this, it is helpful and important to remember that the infancy stories are not just a kind of biography of Jesus' early life. As the late scripture scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown, reminds us, they are literally gospels in miniature. The plot line is simple: The good news of God's salvation is proclaimed; it is accepted by some who worship Jesus; and it is opposed, often violently, by others who try to destroy it. But in the end, God triumphs.

As the early Church reflected on its own experience, it saw exactly that pattern – proclamation followed by a two-fold response – belief and rejection. It saw the same pattern in Jesus' earthly ministry – proclamation of the good news of God's salvation followed by acceptance and belief by some and by opposition and crucifixion by others (the civil and religious establishment). But then God triumphs, raising Jesus to new life.

Matthew and Luke construct their infancy narratives to show that the same pattern can be found there. The birth of the Savior is proclaimed by the angels to the shepherds at Bethlehem; it is accepted by them and by the Magi, but rejected by Herod (the civil establishment) who slaughters the innocents. But God triumphs by leading Jesus out of Herod's grasp. And in today's gospel, Simeon both proclaims God's salvation and predicts the two-fold response – the “fall and rise of many in Israel”. The sword that he says will pierce Mary's being is not a sword of slaughter – as with Herod – but a sword of discrimination, challenging everyone – Mary included – to choose for Jesus. This need to choose is highlighted later on in Luke's gospel (11:27) when a person in the crowd shouts to Jesus: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you.” Jesus' response is to stress that biology (physical motherhood) is not the basis for Mary's greatness. Rather “blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it”. In at least two places in his gospel, Luke tells us specifically that Mary “kept all these things in her heart”.

Every encounter with the Gospel is a challenge and a call for a decision. This story is no exception. It is our privilege and our duty as Christians to proclaim God's salvation – by deed and word – being mindful of the response we will evoke, and remembering that the crib of Bethlehem lies in the shadow of the cross at Calvary.

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